

# Improving EFL Listening Skills by Reading Aloud

## —An Exploratory Study—

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### Abstract

This study focuses on improving listening skills for the English learner through the reading of picture books aloud. The examinee, who learned English in junior and senior high school and never learned it since, attended this experiment. In spite of a short time experiment, the examinee came to recognize the difference of the sounds between 'r' and 'l'. A great number of positive points can be found in this experiment. It might be effective for beginners to utilize a picture book to deduct from the learning burden and also making it easier to understand the story.

### I . Introduction

This study focuses on improving listening skills for English learners through reading aloud. Since there is a great amount of research, listening skills are a deep concern in relation to speaking skills. Once a learner comes to pronounce accurately, it is helpful for them to listen to unfamiliar sounds. For Japanese learners, it is difficult to distinguish two consonants, 'l' and 'r' because Japanese language does not separate the two sounds. In addition, there are a large number of words involved with 'l' and 'r' sounds in English, so it is an important role to recognize the two sounds to learn English in order not to misunderstand. It is also important to read aloud, read and speak at the same time, and to internalize the sounds (see Figure1).

This experiment utilized a picture book called "Fox in Socks". The reasons why the author chose the book are:

- 1) The book is popular in American culture, especially as a children's book. So it is suitable for learning the pronunciation of American English.
- 2) It is easier to understand the story with pictures than without.
- 3) It contains plenty 'l' and 'r' sounds.

A sound file was recorded by Professor G. S. Johnson at Kansai University. He is a professional storyteller for literature.

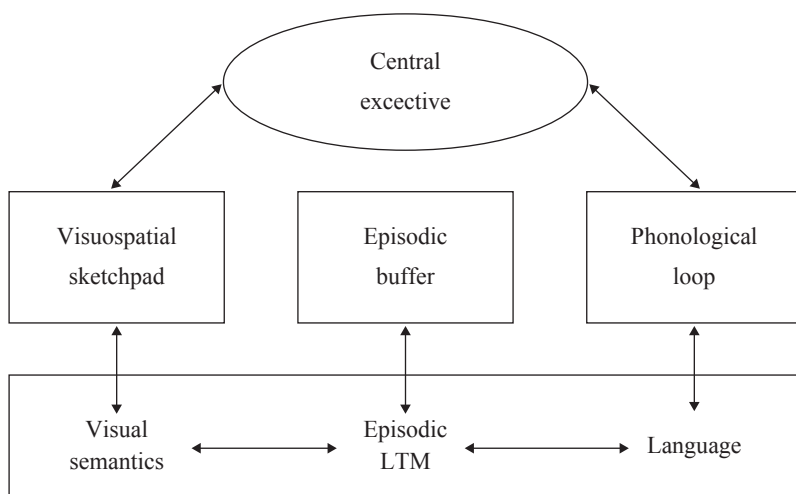


Figure 1. The Multi-component Working Memory Model (Baddeley, 2000)

As far as the importance of visual memory is concerned, Baddeley (2000) has been introduced (see Figure1). Visual memory is as significant as auditory memory. Most books on language and cognition have introduced visual memory as a letter or a word. The author has taken this theory and added another visual memory, pictures, because it may be difficult for beginners to match words with sounds. Therefore, the picture book was adopted for this study.

## II. Method

One English learner, who is a middle-aged Japanese woman, attended this experiment. She learned English in junior and senior high school and never learned it since then. She has lived in Japan and has never used English in her daily life. The examinee has traveled around the world about four times per year, so she has sometimes used English during her travels. Through her experience, the researcher regarded her as a false beginner.

To measure the improvement of her listening skills, the testing was given accordingly. First, the examinee took a listening test using 12 minimal pairs of 'r' and 'l' such as 'raw' and 'law', or 'right' and 'light' (see Figure 2). She then listened to a

### 'l'と'r'の発音

聞こえたと思うほうに○をしてください。

例

1	raw	law	law	raw
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1	raw	law	law	raw
2	right	light	light	right
3	load	road	road	load
4	lead	read	read	lead
5	play	pray	pray	play
6	correct	collect	collect	correct
7	climb	crime	crime	climb
8	flame	frame	frame	flame
9	crown	clown	clown	crown
10	arrive	alive	alive	arrive
11	glass	grass	grass	glass
12	free	flee	flee	free

Figure 2. A Test of Recognition 'l' and 'r' Sounds

sound file as a part of the picture book. After listening to it, the researcher indicated to her to read the book aloud for ten minutes without explaining the feature of the sounds. Next, the examinee took the same test a second time. After the second test, the researcher explained the sounds, and had her pay attention to the sounds 'l' and 'r' while reading aloud. The researcher also explained the features, for example, how to move the tongue, how the sounds are heard. And then the researcher told her to read again while considering 'l' and 'r' sounds. She took the test again after the explanation. The researcher did not let her know the result of the test until all tests were finished in order to keep validation. The results of the tests were compared and feedback was given.

### **III. Result**

In spite of the short practice time, the examinee came to recognize the difference of the sounds between 'r' and 'l' (see Table1). The examinee was able to choose 33% of the correct answers during the first test. This improved 58% during the second test through the practice of reading aloud to 100% the third time. It appeared that the most effective improvement occurred while reading aloud the second time. Especially, she was able to listen to the sounds at the beginning of a word such as with question number 3. According to the results of the test the third time, explaining each sound was quite effective. As far as her interview, she could not listen to any words at first, but came to be aware of the sounds through this test. She was able to understand the words gradually after instructing the words, rhythms and the story. She does not like studying English and has anxiety when reading English sentences. However a picture book had no resistance to studying English for her, so she was able to feel comfortable as if she was reading a fairy tale.

Table 1. The Result of the Tests

			Time		
	words		1	2	3
1	raw	law	○	○	○
2	right	light	○	○	○
3	load	road	×	×	○
4	lead	read	×	○	○
5	play	pray	○	×	○
6	correct	collect	×	○	○
7	climb	crumb	×	×	○
8	flame	frame	○	○	○
9	crown	clown	×	○	○
10	arrive	alive	×	×	○
11	glass	grass	×	○	○
12	free	flee	×	×	○

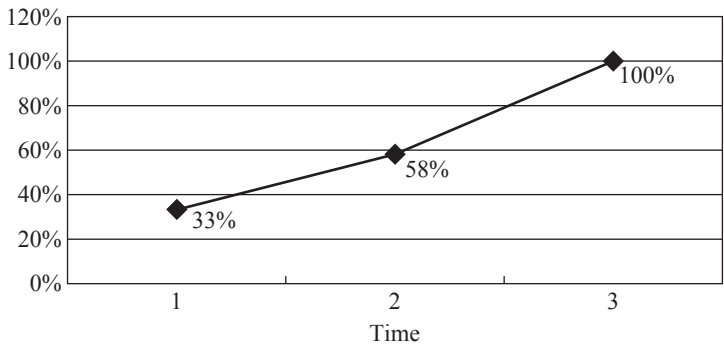


Figure 3. The Percentage of the Correct Answers

## IV. Discussion and Conclusion

The result should be admirable, but it must be understood the lack of reliability due to the number of examinees only being one. The results may be influenced with her hobby, listening to Western popular music, so it has a possibility to cause her to get used to distinguishing the sounds easily. This study is intensive, and it must search for a long span.

There are a great number of positive points in this experiment. It might be effective for beginners to utilize a picture book to deduct from a learning burden and be easy to understand the story. The author realized that the explanation by an instructor becomes a key to learning English. The results of the test show that an improvement occurred throughout the three tests.

There may have been a more reliable effect if more time was taken to examine. This examination had a desirable result, but it needs to be verified for a longer term. For beginners of English learning, learning with fun in order to boost motivation must be learned. Also, there is room to consider that it should compare a picture book and a textbook from the viewpoint of long term memory.

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